

John Altoon

Drawings and Prints





John Altoon | Drawings and Prints

by Walter Hopps and Elke Solomon

The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

Acknowledgments

Among the many people whose generosity and help have made this exhibition possible, I would like to express my deep appreciation to Roberta Altoon and Nicholas Wilder; my thanks also to Larry Bell, Billy Al Bengston, Irving Blum, Ruth Bronstein, Donald Dudley, Ed Moses, Kenneth Price, David Stuart, Mr. and Mrs. Bernard Walsh, and Dr. Milton Wexler.

I would also like to express my gratitude to Barbara Evans and Peninah Petruck, who worked with me on all phases of the exhibition; and to Robert Solomon and Tim Yohn, who edited parts of the catalogue. I am of course indebted to the lenders for their cooperation and assistance.

I am grateful to Gerald Nordland for his catalogue of the Altoon exhibition which he organized in San Francisco in 1967. A full bibliography may be found at the back of the latter.

E.M.S.

Lenders

Mrs. Roberta Altoon
The Estate of John Altoon,
 Courtesy Nicholas Wilder Gallery
L. M. Asher Family
Mr. and Mrs. Bertram Berman
Mr. and Mrs. Irving Blum
Mr. and Mrs. Ben Gazzara
Mr. Frank Gerry
Dr. and Mrs. Merle S. Glick
Mr. Ed Janss
Mr. and Mrs. Bates Lowry
San Francisco Museum of Art
Dr. and Mrs. Melvin Silverman
Miss Laura Lee Stearns
Mr. David Stuart
David Stuart Galleries
Tibor de Nagy Gallery, Inc.
Dr. Milton Wexler

Foreword

The present exhibition of drawings and prints by the late John Altoon, whose work is well known on the West Coast, is long overdue in New York. These drawings ("anything except oil on canvas," in Altoon's words) and prints have been gathered from the artist's estate and numerous private collections on the West Coast. The choice does not constitute a definitive retrospective, but rather a cross-section of Altoon's last ten years of drawings and prints. As such, it is a small selection from a very large body of work. The catalogue essay has been written by Walter Hopps, a close personal friend of Altoon's and one eminently qualified to give an accurate personal account of the artist.

My own interest in the work of John Altoon germinated in the autumn of 1967 on a visit to the David Stuart Gallery. Seeing Altoon's drawings for the first time, I was struck by their visceral and primitive evocation as well as their very caustic and incisive humor.

His style has developed through personal dreams and abstract fantasies. It is apparent that he had a great facility as a draughtsman, a facility that he seemed to consider an impediment. Sometimes he would draw with sticks dipped into ink to make his work more difficult. Unlike many painters, Altoon did not create his drawings as studies for subsequent paintings. Although he considered himself first a painter, he gave drawing a special and independent position in his work. Unlike his paintings, his drawings are frequently vindictive attacks both on the subjects he portrays and on his own facility with line.

These works are not visually easy. They demand

repeated and varied viewing. Altoon deals with an ambiguous space, a space that is bereft of a specific point of departure or reference. Even when he includes a specific landscape reference in his figurative drawings, it is unpleasantly silent, coming from the realms of a deep and mysterious origin. Some of the flower-like forms in the *Harper* series of 1966-67 float within an open airy space with a life of their own. In the figurative drawings, the characters interact but do not communicate with one another. Each figure has a separate, independent life in a world that is silent and ultimately still. In some drawings, there are fast, nervous lines which produce a space and only subsequently present the figures.

Altoon's improbable people exist in a space that is neither two or three-dimensional, but both. In the *Hyperion* pastels, the very patterned background appears to limit the space of those floating abstract figures. Figures and background seem to exist in each other's space simultaneously. In the early gouaches, the planes of color create subtle spatial relationships with one another. In his later drawings, Altoon's use of the air brush allows him to make the relationship between apparent spaces more tenuous. The overall effect—first of the energetic use of line, then of the creation of grotesque figures and of an ambiguous deployment of color—is to attract the spectator to view an apparently simple "picture," only to trap him in an improbable space within which the simple "picture" dissolves into a web of equivocal possibilities.

Elke M. Solomon

ADDENDUM:

p. 4, Lenders: Mr. Charles Cowles

ERRATA:

p. 4, Lenders; p. 19, caption for UNTITLED. 1967.
illustrated below; p. 23, catalogue no. 30;
for Mr. Frank Gerry read Mr. Frank Gehry.

p. 6, and p. 23, catalogue no.8, for UNTITLED. 1963.
Pastel. 30 x 40. Lent by Dr. Milton Wexler.
read: UNTITLED (HYPERION SERIES). 1964. Pastel.
54 x 40. Lent by Dr. Milton Wexler.

p. 12, and p. 23, catalogue no. 10, for UNTITLED (HYPERION
SERIES). 1964. Pastel. 40 x 56. Lent by Dr.
Milton Wexler. read: UNTITLED. 1963. Pastel.
30 x 40. Lent by Dr. Milton Wexler.

p. 13, Photograph has been reproduced upside down.



Untitled. 1963.
Pastel. 30 x 40.
Lent by Dr. Milton Wexler.

From a work in progress, CRY ME A LITTLE BASKET OF TEARS (something I first heard John Altoon say in 1957).

He was describing a dream of his, laughing, and holding his thighs. Girls like nymphs, himself, everybody naked, running around, go into a fountain, beautiful, a nice warm fountain. Wakes up, bright, hot morning, a chick on each side of him (one's a daughter of Aimee Semple McPherson) he has hard-on and is pissing straight up in the air. Was it in Ojai? Didn't she have a goat in her pad?

"Don't ever call him The Indian." To that Artie (Richer) told me I could tell John to bite his ass.

I'm confused about the fact that I'm alive now and John's dead now. This is not something I can ignore and go on to discuss his art. Got to write about him. Anyway, most of his art was done on 30 x 40 Harvey Board about as naturally as a writer reaches for paper 11 x 8½.

The paintings always, almost always, well, not really always, seemed a problem. The drawings and gouaches and near relatives just came and came. God, how we came to depend on them coming in those days.

Shot into the little design agency on Melrose, very chic and on the make with guys working hard in their bright, half-walled little cubicles with lots of tit decor. John's going to do a job. Terrific, now and then, for the money. Partner in firm trying to explain what's to be done while John spills the ink on purpose, siezes a pen point in his fingers, takes somebody's board and does everybody's vision of the smart, sharp man signing a check, an image

to turn up all over L.A. for Security Bank ads. It was one of his fastest line in the West acts and I didn't have time to finish a nice cup of their weird coffee before we were on our way out. I'll tell you, there's nothing like sunshine on a banana tree with those other guys back in there doing it by the numbers.

John's funeral, in their biggest facility high atop Forest Lawn, was the largest gathering of artists in Southern California I ever expect to see, one time one place. As funerals go, it was really fine. Milton Wexler did a good job of getting a lot of people to stand up and talk without it being too damned uncomfortable. I didn't and I still think of all the things I might have said. Had the sense of everybody being there except Ed Kienholz (who hates funerals), whom I really missed since it was Ed who first had introduced me to John in early '57, although anyone hanging around art in Southern California after the war had at least vaguely heard of Altoon, if they hadn't met him.

Kienholz kept telling me I had to meet this guy who was just back from Spain and who really came on and did very interesting work, although maybe too much of it. Altoon was new to Kienholz since Ed had only been around L.A. for about three years at that time. The "too much of it" I encountered first: stacks of drawings and various mixed media washes and gouaches on paper in one corner of the original barn-like Ferus Gallery near the Craig Kauffman and Fred Willington paintings of its first big group show, which had some really fine paintings in it, Still, Diebenkorn, Lobdell, etc. Almost couldn't look at the stuff since there was so much and it all looked interesting. Next afternoon I think Altoon and I are there at the same time, both in such a

pleasantly agitated state that we couldn't do an effective job of either talking or looking, while trying to do both. It was immediately assumed that Altoon would be part of the Gallery and was. Some while later Kienholz, who had the job of physically keeping the Ferus Gallery together, which was not easy, managed to reach me by phone to announce with a certain irritation that Altoon, Dane Dixon and Gil Henderson, I believe, had broken in the night before, found canvas in the back and done a really bad big action painting on the floor in the middle of the exhibition, leaving it and one hell of a mess for the whole world to enjoy.

Bob Alexander was reading Robert Creeley's poem that John loved perhaps more than any other: "Wicker Basket." Soft night, really relaxed, Bob can read the poems of his day better than anyone I have ever heard, and when he wants, can do it from a laundry ticket. Think we were at John's first or second place in West Hollywood. Was John Reed there? Was it Artie Richer who suddenly swan dived from the sleeping loft onto the table where tony was cleaning an enormous amount of grass? Must have been.

"It's exactly like the color of dirty money." John referring to a particularly virulent, muddy, gray-green being applied to a new building in Beverly Hills.

Everybody and everything that John encountered and all those people, animals, and things in his head seemed to all find their way into his work. Many, hundreds in fact, turning up again and again in various guises. Really felt this in his first show in the Ferus, shared with John Mason's rugged ceramics. Thank God I was able to

help hang that show. Gave me a chance to really see, learn and come to know John's drawing carefully for the first time. Ed Primus, one of the town's gracious pirates of pre-Columbian art, lent a really fine drawing of a tangle of people drowning while funny fish worked on what they could get their teeth into. Only drastic note was how does it all get framed and who pays?

Opening night had to have been one of the biggest and weirdest gallery openings ever seen in the town at that time. Seems John knew everybody or they knew him. Enough went on to destroy anybody's mind. I seem to remember Alexander and Richer stripping and wrestling to what they intended to be the death on the floor with my visiting mother-in-law as a most interested audience.

By now word was out that Altoon 30 x 40's were papering the walls of Beverly Hills. Work by everyone sold badly, but none as well as Altoon's. And he kept the Gallery going, in fact, to a degree that allowed the showing of a pretty impressive list of artists. All that turns around, but not quite everybody gets his turn.

As legend, we could all believe it. I don't think anyone ever really dealt with it as fact. I mean, who puts his head on a railroad track somewhere in Spain and has the cowcatcher knock him off the tracks merely busted up a little.

John was really excited, talking faster than usual, just back from New York, really trying to get me to pay attention, which I was, but he was so serious he couldn't tell that, yes, I had heard of Barnett Newman and had heard he was having a show at French & Co. and it was the first one in a lot of years and the paintings were



Untitled. 1959.
Gouache. 30 x 40.
Lent by Dr. and Mrs. Merle S. Glick.

so serious and so good that I wasn't going to be able to believe it, even if I got my ass on a plane and got there the next day and really looked at those mothers, which I certainly was about to do while I was trying to figure out how it was that Altoon, whose work seemed so far away from where Newman's was, should talk to me about this so passionately like no one I've heard before or since. Some years later, having climbed into a cab with the Newmans and the Weismans (collectors visiting New York from California), I listened to Barney explain to the Weismans why they were there: "It's partly because of a lot of young artists who are working in L.A. whom I don't know and probably never will."

The trip started off beautifully, my first ride on a jet plane. Altoon, Henderson and myself high and happy watching sunrise on the Pacific and sunset over the Atlantic. Cab straight to the Cedar Bar since Altoon was ready to get with Franz Kline right that minute and Fielding Dawson and Ray Parker, who wanted us to come to dinner, but we never did, but managed to get a room at the Earle Hotel and it was late and we were drunk but we found our way to a club called Jazz Gallery and Art Blakey's group was the loudest music I had ever heard for a few minutes before I couldn't hear anything at all, but watched Altoon begin the trip of close encounter with one of the women attached to somebody in that band and that was all before mind turned off. It seemed on and off a few times. On: John had her by the ankles, holding them high in the air, everybody laughing. Where were we? There were a few more on and offs like that. It was a strange thumping sound that woke me up. Bright, daylight, hotel bed, wondered why I had cuffs and cuff links but no shirt. What was

that thumping? John running toward window. Where was Henderson? We're on the ledge. I couldn't hear a thing. Total silence. No, total noise, we're both screaming. People are in the room. Police car. Silence, no it's the siren. Finally gets through that we are on the way to Bellevue. The most tedious, confused, frightening set of explanations. Cops, attendants, people, receiving room and who's the patient? Where's Altoon? Running up and down hallways. Finally under a table in a room full of children. I'll never forget those children. Sunday morning.

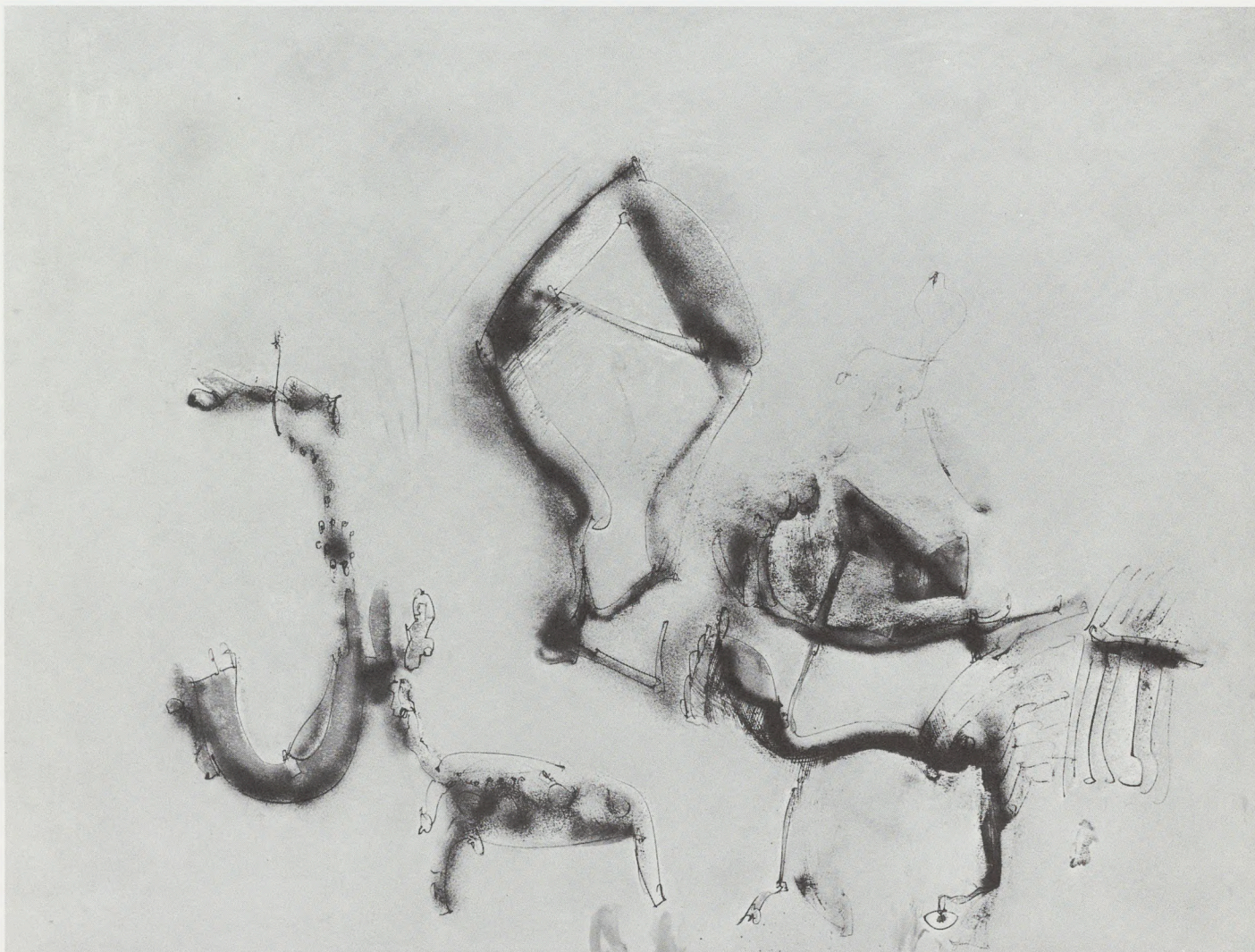
On the way up the stairs to my apartment I wondered whose green MG was parked in the drive next to the Gallery. I didn't see Irving Blum. John was in what used to be the living room before he moved in and was now the drawing storage room talking with someone whose voice I didn't recognize. When I walked in I didn't see them. The gun and pile of money were just too big. Actually it was a small gun and not that big a pile of money. Later John, after he left, wasn't sure how many thousand dollars, and explained that he came back to this country once in a while to do a job and he had no idea that it was going to happen that day and that it was a hell of a thing for him to do while John was spending the hour with the psychiatrist and that mainly he was in the apartment to give us this Brazilian parrot named Susie. Within two weeks Bengston had fallen in love with Susie.

Altoon never really walked around—had this way of moving *everywhere* with a kind of solid bouncy float. It occurs to me that I never heard him move, just his voice and laugh.

Walter Hopps



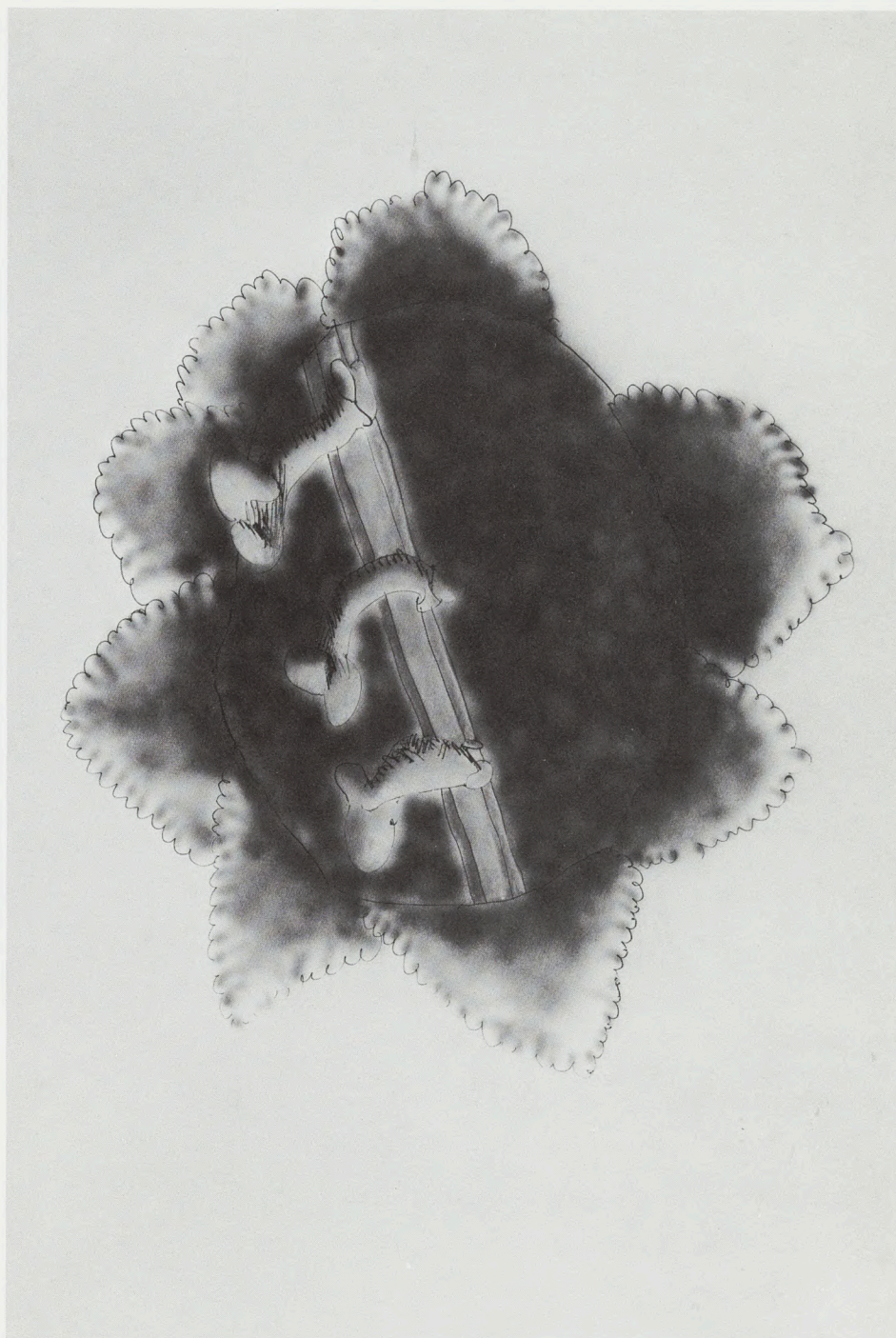
Untitled. 1961.
Ink, 40 x 30.
Lent by L. M. Asher Family.



Untitled (Hyperion Series). 1964.

Pastel. 40 x 56.

Lent by Dr. Milton Wexler.



Untitled. 1965-66.
Ink and watercolor. 60 x 40.
Lent by Mrs. Roberta Altoon.



Untitled. 1966.

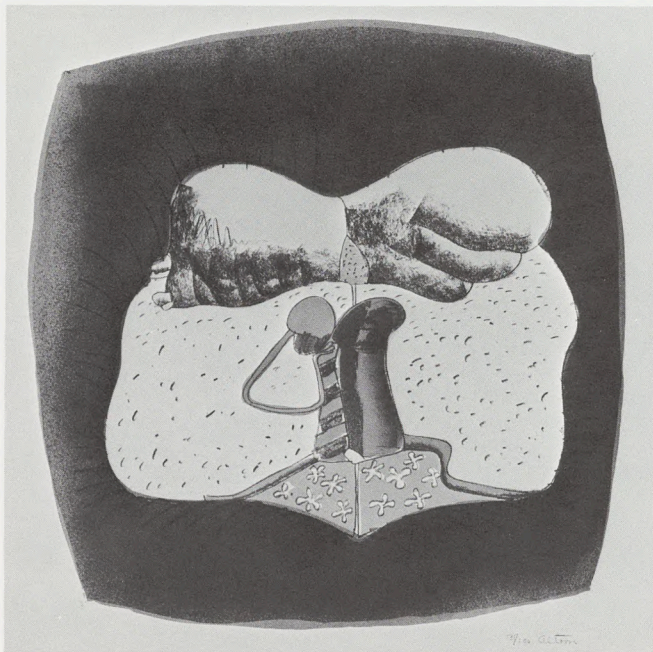
Ink and watercolor. 30 x 40.

From Estate of John Altoon.

above
Untitled. 1966.
Ink and watercolor. 30 x 40.
From Estate of John Altoon.

below
Untitled. 1966.
Ink. 30 x 40.
From Estate of John Altoon.





above
About Women. 1965-66.
 Lithograph. 19 x 38.

below
About Women. 1965-66.
 Lithograph. 19 x 38.



far left
About Women. 1965-66.
 Lithograph. 19 x 19.

center
About Women. 1965-66.
 Lithograph. 19 x 19.

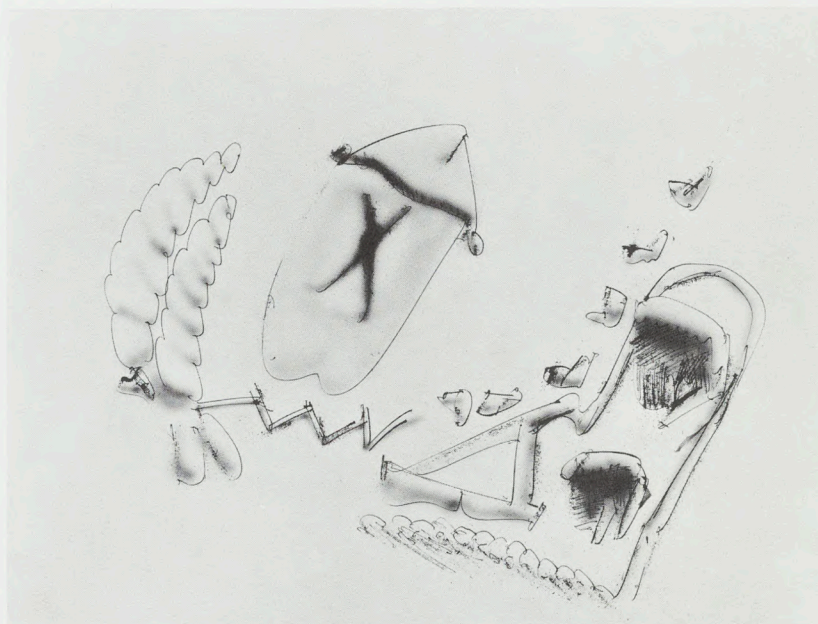
left
About Women. 1965-66.
 Lithograph. 19 x 19.



Untitled (Harper Series). 1966.
Ink and watercolor, 60 x 40.
From Estate of John Altoon.

above
Untitled. 1967.
Ink and watercolor. 30 x 40.
From Estate of John Altoon.

below
Untitled. 1967.
Ink and watercolor. 30 x 40.
Lent by Mr. Frank Gerry.

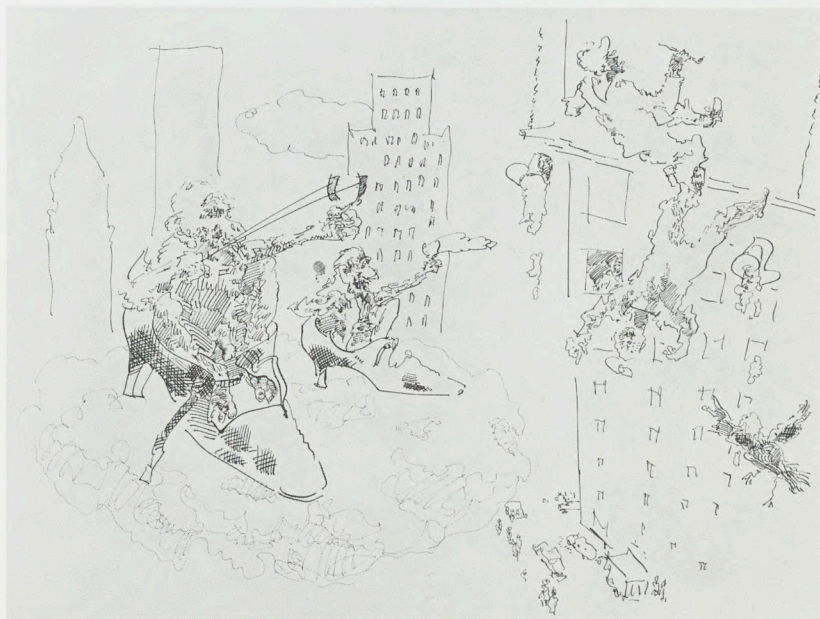
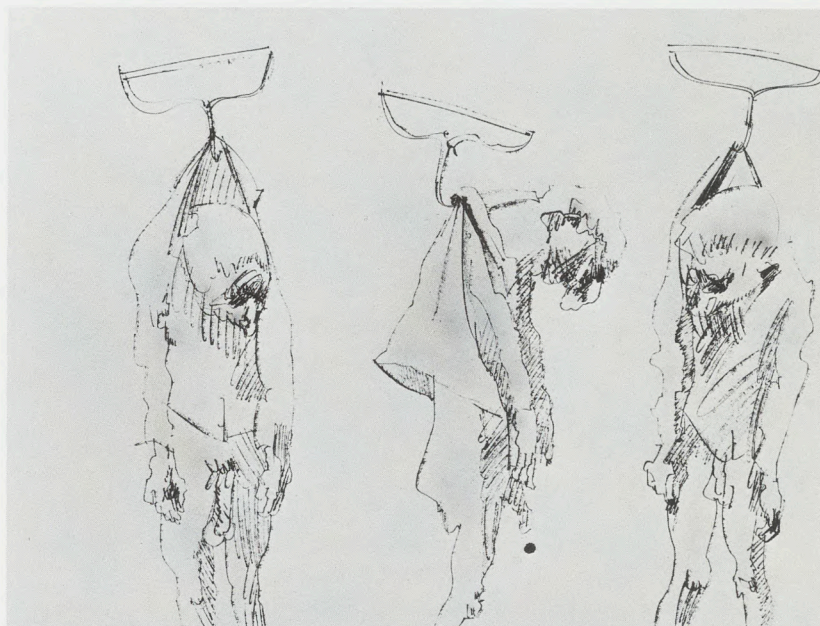




Untitled, 1968.
Ink and watercolor. 60 x 40.
Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Ben Gazzara.

above
Untitled. 1968.
 Ink and watercolor. 30 x 40.
 From Estate of John Altoon.

below
Untitled (Animal Series). 1968.
 Ink. 30 x 40.
 Lent by Laura Lee Stearns.





above

Untitled, 1968.

Ink and watercolor. 30 x 40.

From Estate of John Altoon.

below

Untitled (Cowboys and Indian Series), 1968.

Ink and watercolor. 30 x 40.

Lent by Tibor de Nagy Gallery, Inc.



Catalogue of the Exhibition

Works are arranged chronologically, in all mediums. Dimensions are in inches, height preceding width. All watercolors and drawings are on board unless otherwise noted.

1. *Santa Fay*. 1958-59.
Gouache. 30 x 40.
Lent by Dr. and Mrs. Melvin Silverman. Illus. cover.
2. *Untitled*. 1958-59.
Pastel. 30 x 40.
Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Bertram Berman.
3. *Untitled*. 1959.
Gouache. 30 x 40.
Lent by Dr. and Mrs. Merle S. Glick. Illus. p. 9.
4. *Untitled*. 1961.
Ink. 30 x 40.
Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Irving Blum.
5. *Untitled*. 1961.
Ink. 30 x 40.
Lent by Estate of John Altoon, Courtesy Nicholas Wilder Gallery.
6. *Untitled*. 1961.
Ink. 40 x 30.
Lent by L. M. Asher Family. Illus. p. 11.
7. *Untitled*. 1961.
Ink on paper. 30 x 40.
Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Bates Lowry.
8. *Untitled*. 1963.
Pastel. 30 x 40.
Lent by Dr. Milton Wexler. Illus. p. 6.
9. *Hyperion Lady and EB*. 1963.
Ink and pastel on paper. 60 x 40.
Lent by Mr. Charles Cowles.
10. *Untitled (Hyperion Series)*. 1964.
Pastel. 40 x 56.
Lent by Dr. Milton Wexler. Illus. p. 12.
11. *Untitled (Sunset Series)*. 1964.
Pastel. 60 x 40.
Lent by San Francisco Museum of Art.
12. *Untitled*. 1964.
Pastel. 56 x 40.
Lent by Dr. Milton Wexler.
13. *The Tattooed Lady*. 1964.
Pastel on paper. 60 x 40.
Lent by Dr. Milton Wexler.
14. *Untitled*. 1964.
Ink and watercolor. 60 x 40.
Lent by Estate of John Altoon, Courtesy Nicholas Wilder Gallery.
15. *Untitled*. 1965.
Ink and watercolor. 30 x 40.
Lent by David Stuart.
16. *Untitled (Tamarind #1328)*. 1965.
Lithograph. 22 x 30. 20/20.
Lent by Estate of John Altoon, Courtesy David Stuart Galleries.
17. *Untitled (Tamarind #1354)*. 1965.
Lithograph. 22 x 30. 12/20.
Lent by Estate of John Altoon, Courtesy David Stuart Galleries.
18. *About Women*. 1965-66.
Portfolio of ten lithographs. 19 x 19 and 19 x 38.
Collection Whitney Museum of American Art: Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Kenneth E. Tyler. Illus. pps. 16 & 17.
19. *Untitled*. 1965-66.
Ink and watercolor. 60 x 40.
Lent by Mrs. Roberta Altoon. Illus. p. 13.
20. *Untitled*. 1966.
Ink and watercolor. 30 x 40.
Lent by Estate of John Altoon, Courtesy Nicholas Wilder Gallery.
21. *Untitled*. 1966.
Ink. 30 x 40.
Lent by Estate of John Altoon, Courtesy Nicholas Wilder Gallery. Illus. p. 15.
22. *Untitled*. 1966.
Ink and watercolor. 30 x 40.
Lent by Estate of John Altoon, Courtesy Nicholas Wilder Gallery.
23. *Untitled*. 1966.
Ink and watercolor. 30 x 40.
Lent by Estate of John Altoon, Courtesy Nicholas Wilder Gallery. Illus. p. 14.
24. *Untitled*. 1966.
Ink and watercolor.
Lent by Estate of John Altoon, Courtesy Nicholas Wilder Gallery. Illus. p. 15.
25. *Untitled (Harper Series)*. Late 1966.
Ink and watercolor. 60 x 40.
Lent by Estate of John Altoon, Courtesy Nicholas Wilder Gallery. Illus. p. 18.
26. *Untitled (Harper Series)*. 1966-67.
Ink and watercolor. 30 x 40.
Lent by Mrs. Roberta Altoon.
27. *Untitled (Harper Series)*. 1967.
Ink and watercolor. 60 x 40.
Lent by Dr. Milton Wexler.
28. *Untitled*. 1967.
Ink and watercolor. 30 x 40.
Lent by Estate of John Altoon, Courtesy Nicholas Wilder Gallery. Illus. p. 19.
29. *Untitled*. 1967.
Ink and watercolor. 30 x 40.
Lent by Estate of John Altoon, Courtesy Nicholas Wilder Gallery.
30. *Untitled*. 1967.
Ink and watercolor. 30 x 40.
Lent by Mr. Frank Gerry. Illus. p. 19.
31. *Untitled (Object Series)*. 1968.
Watercolor. 30 x 40.
Lent by Mrs. Roberta Altoon.
32. *Untitled*. 1968.
Ink and watercolor. 60 x 40.
Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Ben Gazzara. Illus. p. 20.
33. *Untitled*. 1968.
Ink and watercolor. 30 x 40.
Lent by Estate of John Altoon, Courtesy Nicholas Wilder Gallery. Illus. p. 21.
34. *Untitled (Animal Series)*. 1968.
Ink. 30 x 40.
Lent by Laura Lee Stearns. Illus. p. 21.

35. *Untitled (Animal Series)*. 1968.
Ink and watercolor. 30 x 40.
Lent by Estate of John Altoon, Courtesy Nicholas Wilder
Gallery.
36. *Untitled (Cowboys and Indians Series)*. 1968.
Ink and watercolor. 30 x 40.
Lent by Mr. Ed Janss.
37. *Untitled (Cowboys and Indians Series)*. 1968.
Ink and watercolor. 30 x 40.
Lent by Tibor de Nagy Gallery, Inc. Illus. p. 22.
38. *Untitled*. 1968.
Ink and watercolor. 30 x 40.
Lent by Estate of John Altoon, Courtesy Nicholas Wilder
Gallery. Illus. p. 22.
39. *Untitled (Tamarind #2189)*. 1968.
Lithograph. 22 x 30. 5/20.
Lent by Estate of John Altoon, Courtesy David Stuart
Galleries.
40. *Untitled (Tamarind #2181)*. 1968.
Lithograph. 22 x 30. 10/20.
Lent by Estate of John Altoon, Courtesy David Stuart
Galleries.
41. *Untitled (Tamarind #2222)*. 1968.
Lithograph (hand colored). 22 x 30. Artist's proof.
Lent by Estate of John Altoon, Courtesy David Stuart
Galleries.

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